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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001361

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TAGS: PHUM PINS SCUL PGOV KISL BM

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS/ETHNIC TENSIONS SPREAD TO RANGOON

Classified By: CDA a.i. Ron McMullen for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: For the past four nights, October 25-28, and coinciding with the advent of the holy month of Ramadan, Rangoon has experienced low-scale religious violence between Muslims and Buddhists that originally flared up in mid-October in upper Burma. The motives for these attacks, their instigators, and allegations of government involvement remain hazy. Religious conflict is not new in Burma, and there is a long history of tension between the Buddhist majority and the local "Indian" community, a growing, religiously diverse population of South Asians that encompasses most of Burma's several million Muslims. However, religious and ethnic violence is rare in the capital city and the Muslim community is apprehensive about further attacks. The regime has taken firm action, deploying riot police and troops that have minimized injuries and property damage. However, religious and ethnic tensions are significant and underscore general political and economic discontent throughout Burma. End summary.

Religious Conflict Comes to Rangoon

12. (C) According to eyewitness accounts, on four consecutive nights October 25-28, Buddhist monks and other "unruly" civilians have attacked mosques, shops, and homes in several of Rangoon's four major Indian/Muslim quarters. Muslim youths have responded with rock throwing and several injuries have been reported. Embassy officers visited the Muslim quarters and observed some broken windows and minor destruction of cars and storefronts. Local residents report that government authorities have deployed riot police and army troops into the affected neighborhoods to secure the areas and to lead early morning clean-up operations, leaving very little evidence of the violent confrontations. The GOB has reportedly instituted an indefinite 7:00 pm curfew on monasteries in the Rangoon area, but has not made any public acknowledgment of the skirmishes.

13. (C) The Rangoon incidents come on the tail of several violent Buddhist-Muslim confrontations on October 11-12 and 19-20 in two towns near Mandalay. A representative of a Islamic organization in Rangoon told us that these two incidents claimed nine lives and led to the destruction of two mosques and several homes. The representative said he thought the clashes emanated from a personal business dispute and then spread along religious lines. He blamed local authorities for doing nothing initially to prevent the conflict from spreading.

14. (C) According to local contacts, a large troop and police presence in the Mandalay area initially prevented the mid-October disturbances from spreading directly into Burma's second largest city. However, according to sketchy reports, authorities arrested a prominent Buddhist monk on October 28 for delivering anti-Muslim sermons and troops were subsequently dispatched to quell a violent counter-demonstration led by several hundred monks at a Mandalay monastery.

The Government Responds: No Problem

15. (C) Following the mid-October skirmishes in the Mandalay area, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs convoked ambassadors from six Muslim countries and the Ministry of Religious Affairs summoned leaders of Burma's four main Muslim groups to brief them on developments. According to our diplomatic colleagues, the GOB downplayed the violence and gave assurances that the government had full control of the situation. The Pakistan DCM told us on October 28 that the Muslim diplomatic corps planned to deliver a joint demarche before the end of the week expressing deep concern over the latest attacks and skirmishes in Rangoon. He said that the tight-knit South Asian and Muslim communities were apprehensive about further violence. He added his own view that religious tensions were an annual occurrence in Burma, coinciding with various religious holidays, but that violence in Rangoon was rare.

16. (C) On October 28, the Minister of Religious Affairs gave Muslim leaders an additional briefing and claimed that the attacks near Mandalay and in Rangoon had been the work of "underground cells of political opposition groups" hoping to

embarrass Burma during the APEC Summit and various ASEAN meetings. The Minister detailed government actions to date, including the detention of the anti-Muslim monk in Mandalay and the arrest of 43 monks involved in the Rangoon attacks, and promised that the GOB would do all it could to prevent further religious violence. However, the Minister urged the Muslim leaders to take care of themselves and their communities, avoiding any provocation or acts of revenge. One Muslim leader told us that local government officials had separately threatened to arrest any Muslim calling the faithful to prayer via loudspeaker or undertaking any other publicly "provocative" act. Muslim leaders tell us they will do what they can, but add that they cannot stop their followers from "defending themselves or their homes."

History Often Repeats

17. (C) Small-scale religious violence in Burma is unusual, especially in Rangoon, but hardly unprecedented. There was a small skirmish between Buddhists and Muslims in a town about 150 miles south of Mandalay in July and a larger incident occurred in 2000 in Pyay, about 200 miles northwest of Rangoon. There is also a long history, tracing back to the British colonial era, of mutual mistrust and dislike between the predominately Buddhist Burman majority and the minority Muslim, Hindu, and Christian Burmese citizens of Indian origin. In fact, the South Asian community was until late in the colonial period the majority ethnic group in Rangoon, outnumbering native Burmans. It is a common belief, though unsubstantiated, that the government itself often provokes these Buddhist-Muslim clashes to divert people's attention from food shortages or other economic and political problems.

Comment: Who's to Blame?

18. (C) The complicated nature of inter-religious relations in Burma makes motive for these latest disturbances hard to grasp. Muslim leaders in Rangoon reject the GOB's claims of sinister political "destructionists" and assert that the attacks were too well organized to be anything but government-sponsored. We have no solid proof that the GOB or one of its instruments were involved, though, and it seems illogical to inflame traditional tensions in the heart of the capital city.

19. (C) The Mandalay and Rangoon flare ups, provoked by the SPDC or not, are likely fueled this year by overlapping major Buddhist and Muslim holidays. During this period, hotheads of both religions are at the peak of chauvinism; identifying themselves most powerfully as Buddhists or Muslims -- rather than Burmese citizens all suffering together under the same yoke. Though it appears the regime is taking steps to ensure these tensions remain in hand, an increasingly large Muslim community in Rangoon may be less likely than in the past to take religious violence lying down.

McMullen